Literature Review: Study of Restorative Justice for

Implementation at Locke High School

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During the 2011-2012 school year, Animo Locke Technology High School in Watts, CA reported 180 students suspended out of 669, resulting in a suspension rate of 28.3% (“CA Dept of Education, Data & Statistics”, 2014). This statistic is significantly higher than Los Angeles Unified’s reported rate of 2.7% that year (“CA Dept of Education, Data & Statistics”, 2014). Also, Animo Locke Technology High School reported an enrollment of 69% Latino and 31% African American, which means that all of the 180 suspensions were applied towards students of color (“CA Dept of Education, Data & Statistics”, 2014). This mirrors the disproportionate rates at which students of color are suspended across the state and district. For example, in Los Angeles Unified, African American students are suspended at nearly 6 times the rate than whites (“Fix School Discipline: Educator Toolkit”, 2014). In addition to the jarring inequity of this situation, two decades of research has demonstrated that there is “no research base to support frequent suspension or expulsion in response to non-violent and mundane forms of adolescent misbehavior… frequent suspension and expulsion are associated with negative outcomes; and better alternatives are available” (“Fix School Discipline: Educator Toolkit”, 2014, p. 3).

I conducted this Literature Review in order to explore Restorative Justice as an alternative to punitive discipline at Locke High School. I intended to answer the following questions about Restorative Practices:

1. Why is Restorative Justice a desired alternative to the traditional punitive system of discipline?
2. How has Restorative Justice transformed school culture in urban schools?
3. What are some guiding principles in order to implement Restorative Justice successfully?

**Why is Restorative Justice a desired alternative to the traditional punitive system of discipline?**

The traditional punitive model responds to harm by replicating harm against the offender (Davis, 2014). In contrast, Restorative Justice seeks to repair harm by asking who was harmed and figuring out the needs and obligations of all affected (Davis, 2014). Not only would a restorative system reduce suspensions and promote a positive school culture, it would minimize out of class time for frequently disciplined students, who are in highest need of academic support and intervention in the first place. Students who are suspended or expelled are “5 times more likely to drop out, 6 times more likely to repeat a grade, and also 3 times more likely to have contact with the juvenile justice system in the following year” (“Fix School Discipline: Educator Toolkit”, 2014, p. 5).

**How has Restorative Justice transformed school culture in urban schools?**

Various studies show that Restorative Justice works to hold students accountable and keep them in school (“Fix School Discipline: Educator Toolkit”, 2014). For example, a UC Berkeley study of a Restorative Justice program at Cole Middle School in Oakland showed a 89% drop in suspensions from 2006-2007 (“Fix School Discipline: Educator Toolkit”, 2014). At Richmond High School in West Contra Costa Unified School District, a 2011 Restorative School Discipline Program cut the school’s 500 suspensions in half from 2011 to 2012 (“Fix School Discipline: Educator Toolkit”, 2014). At West Philadelphia High School, suspensions dropped 50% and violent acts and serious incidents declined 52% after one year of implementing Restorative Justice (“Fix School Discipline: Educator Toolkit”, 2014).

At Humanities Preparatory Academy in New York City, teachers and students have formed a Fairness Committee in order to implement Restorative Justice in a particularly effective and creative way (Hantzopoulos, 2013). The Fairness Committee was designed for members of the community to grapple with the broader core values of the school when infractions arise (Hantzopoulos, 2013). Through “dialogue and consensus,” the committee seeks out appropriate consequences, rather that prescribed “punishments” (Hantzopoulos, 2013, p. 8). The committee involves all members of the school community including students, teachers, and office staff who are selected in an ad-hoc fashion, with committee members rotating on a case-by-case basis (Hantzopoulos, 2013). The Fairness Committee works because it encourages student voice, democratic participation, and integrates the school’s core values (Hantzopoulos, 2013). The committee “validates students humanity and worth” as well as serves as a form of “dropout prevention and academic re-socialization” as well (Hantzopoulos, 2013, p. 10).

**What are some guiding principles in order to implement Restorative Justice successfully?**

In order to be implemented effectively, Restorative Justice must not be “rigidly imposed on a school,” but rather should be integrated to respond to the needs and embody the values of the school community (Hantzopoulos, 2013, p. 10). In addition to this observation, there are a few guiding principles that contribute to the successful implementation of Restorative Practices at various sites.

Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth (RJOY) is a coalition that has been working to shift the culture in Oakland away from “knee-jerk punitive responses to youthful wrongdoing that replicate harm instead of healing it” (“Fix School Discipline: Educator Toolkit”, 2014, p. 27). During the first two to three years of a school of 200-500 students, RJOY provides a full time coordinator who facilitates training, implements circles, and integrates Restorative Justice into the daily school functions (“Fix School Discipline: Educator Toolkit”, 2014, p. 28). Next, three tiers of training are provided. Tier 1 involves training everyone in the school including teachers, school security officers, and administrators in community building circles (“Fix School Discipline: Educator Toolkit”, 2014). At this level, the school is focused on implementing proactive restorative strategies with a school-wide focus (“Fix School Discipline: Educator Toolkit”, 2014). Tier 2 involves training about facilitating conflict circles to repair harm, which works as an alternative method to suspension and expulsion (“Fix School Discipline: Educator Toolkit”, 2014). At this level, teachers are not necessarily involved because it takes a lot of time to get buy-in from the victim, offender, and other people affected (“Fix School Discipline: Educator Toolkit”, 2014). Finally at the third tier, the school implements circles for suspended or incarcerated youth who are returning to the school setting (“Fix School Discipline: Educator Toolkit”, 2014). These circles involve probation officers, parents, teachers, administrators, and the re-entering student who all collaboratively identify positive supports to assist in a healthy re-integration into school (“Fix School Discipline: Educator Toolkit”, 2014).

The central structure of Restorative Justice is the circle, where the process of healing and repairing harm begins (Pavelka, 2013). The process includes a circle keeper or teacher facilitator, the wrongdoer, and those affected by the occurrence, whether it is one student or many (Pavelka, 2013). Based on traditional practices by indigenous tribes, the circle keeper uses a talking piece that is passed around the circle to the individual speakers (Pavelka, 2013). Each participant must observe the rules of the circle, which include respect to one another, only having one person speak at a time, and above all, confidentiality (Pavelka, 2013). Finally, each individual addresses how the wrongful occurrence has affected them and offers ways to seek reparation (Pavelka, 2013).

**Conclusion**

Restorative Justice can be a powerful way of teaching young people the tools for resolving conflict at school and in their own daily lives. It can rescue students with failing grades and multiple incarcerations, and show them a path out of the cycle of conflict and harm, towards healing, academic success, and graduation (Davis 2014). Even long-term enemies can become friends “after sitting in a peacemaking circle” (Davis 2014, p. 41). Students who practice Restorative Justice often ask for a circle when they feel anger towards one another rather than seeking out a fight (Davis 2014). Instead of resorting to violence, through Restorative Justice, youth can be empowered to engage in a restorative process that brings together persons harmed with the persons responsible in a safe and respectful space, “promoting dialogue, accountability, a deeper sense of community, and healing” (Davis 2014).

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